Philanthropy 1992–2022

What difference can 30 years make?

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Dorothy A. Johnson Center
FOR PHILANTHROPY

Grand Valley State University

Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy

The Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University was established in 1992 with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Our mission is to be a global leader in helping individuals and organizations understand, strengthen, and advance philanthropy, resulting in a smart, adaptive sector that helps create strong, inclusive communities.

We put research to work with and for professionals across the country and the world. Through professional education offerings; research, evaluation, and consulting services; and bold thinking to advance the field, we support a philanthropic ecosystem defined by effective philanthropy, strong nonprofits, and informed community change.

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Introduction

Thirty years is not a long time for some fields — geology, for instance. But for philanthropy and the nonprofit sector — and especially the study of and training in those fields — thirty years is a big deal. Consider that the premier industry publication, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy,* was only founded in 1988. Also, most institutions for research about this field, and nearly all university degree programs, have been established in the past three decades.

The Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership — now called the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy — was founded at Grand Valley State University in 1992. It seems fitting, then, on the occasion of our 30th anniversary, to look back at what things looked like at the beginning — as well as at the remarkable transformation and growth of the field since then.

Who was giving in 1992 and in what ways? What was the foundation world like in 1992? What stories were on the front page of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy?* How many other university-based centers were there at the time? And how does this compare to the current landscape of giving, nonprofits, and philanthropic studies?

This essay not only reminds us what things looked like in 1992, but reveals how the practices of giving, the makeup and number of institutions, and the intensity and breadth of research and teaching about philanthropy have all expanded considerably and changed in sometimes dramatic ways.

Megadonors have become much more mega, the lines between the sectors have blurred more than anyone expected, and many more academic programs have opened their doors. Still, many aspects of the field and its institutions have endured — not always for the better. Nonprofit ethics scandals remain in the news as they were 30 years ago, and we still struggle with how to address persistent social and racial inequities. However, the overriding theme here is the incredible expansion and change in these past thirty years.

Giving changed — how much, where to, and who from.

Giving increased in tandem with the economy, but the mix of giving sources shifted.

According to our best annual estimate of charitable giving, in the publication *Giving USA,* total giving from all sources in 1992 was $124.31 billion (1993). In 2021 (the latest year calculated), that total rose to $484.85 billion, an increase of $360 billion over 30 years (Giving USA, 2022).

However, this increase is not as astonishing as it might seem because the total giving figure has continued to track closely with the size of the overall U.S. economy. Giving now is roughly 2% of the national GDP, just as it was 2% back in 1992 (Giving USA, 2022). As the economy grew, so did giving.

What has changed is the mix of charitable sources, as shown in Table 1. The most dramatic change is in the relative amount of total giving coming from individuals versus foundations. While individuals are still the largest source, they account now for only about two-thirds of total giving — whereas they were 82% of the total 30 years ago. This relative decline is less a result of individual giving declining, and more because the share of giving coming from foundations has risen so significantly, from less than 7% in 1992 to nearly 19% of all giving today.

Table 1. Sources of charitable donations in 1992 and 2021

	1992	2021	% Change
Individuals	$101.83 (81.9%)	$326.87 (67.4%)	- 14.5%
Foundations	$8.33 (6.7%)	$90.88 (18.7%)	+ 12.0%
Bequests	$8.15 (6.6%)	$46.01 (9.5%)	+ 2.9%
Corporations	$6.00 (4.8%)	$21.08 (4.3%)	- 0.5%
TOTAL	**$124.31**	**$484.85**	

NOTE: All figures in billions of nominal dollars.

That big increase in foundation giving can be attributed to a lot of causes (e.g., the continued concentration of wealth in the U.S., the incredible growth in the stock market [where foundation assets are often invested], and perhaps even the increasing popularity of "limited-life" foundations that choose to give substantially more than the 5% minimum). But the implications of this shift in giving sources for the sector are major. Foundations have even more power in our field than they did 30 years ago, and fundraisers are rebalancing their efforts away from annual givers and toward institutional and major donors.

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Collective and collaborative sources of giving have also increased substantially in the past three decades. Giving circles, while not new in concept, have exploded in practice, especially in the last decade or so. One 2017 study that the Johnson Center co-conducted found the number of giving circles in the U.S. had tripled in the decade prior (Bearman et al.).

Funder or donor collaboratives have also become increasingly popular and influential (Powell et al., 2021). These collaboratives involve institutional (and sometimes large individual) donors working together (e.g., learning and strategizing together, sometimes pooling funds for greater leverage) to tackle a specific problem or advance a shared goal.

The percentage of charitable dollars going to religion dropped significantly.

Another big shift we can see from *Giving USA* estimates is in the cause areas that these charitable sources chose to support — or rather, one cause area in particular: religion. While other areas such as human services and education have seen small changes in the percentage of charitable dollars coming their way in this 30-year period, none are as dramatic as religion. In 1992, nearly half of all donations (46%) went to religious causes and organizations (Giving USA, 1993). By 2021, that number had fallen to 27% (Giving USA, 2022). All signs point to its continued decline.

To be sure, religion still gets more than any other single category — in fact, it gets twice as much as the next largest category, education. But the relative prominence and role of religious giving is certainly one of the most significant changes in our sector in the past three decades. In one sense, this tracks with the decline in individual giving compared to foundation giving, as individuals often give to their house of worship or

organizations tied to their faith, while relatively few foundations give to faith-based causes. But it also reflects the overall decline in religiosity in America in recent decades (Spicer, 2019). This has big consequences for the faith-based segment of the nonprofit world — still a sizable segment, but one facing strong headwinds.

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Megadonors became so much more mega.

The biggest gifts, givers, and giving institutions have always attracted a lot of attention, for obvious reasons. In 1992, the largest foundation by annual grantmaking (and endowment size, as it happens) was the Ford Foundation, which gave $282 million that year (Meckstroth & Arnsberger, n.d.). In 2021, however, the largest foundation by grantmaking and endowment size was the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which gave a whopping $5.95 billion in grants (2022).

While the increase in overall giving tracked the growth in the economy, this increase in the biggest foundation donor is significantly larger than the increase in GDP (roughly 270%; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022) across those three decades. If the 1992 giving by Ford increased the same amount as GDP increased in those years, that $282 million would be a bit over $1 billion in annual giving in 2021. Again, actual giving by Gates in 2021 was nearly $6 billion. Gates is also far bigger now compared to other foundations than Ford was compared to its contemporaries in 1992.

Moreover, individual megadonors have become more prominent as well. No one systematically tracked the biggest donors in 1992, but we can be confident in saying that there was no one giving at levels comparable to Bill and Melinda Gates (who gave $15 billion as individuals in 2021) or Mackenzie Scott (likely more than $10 billion in 2021, but we don't know the total for sure) or any number of other billionaire donors today (Di Mento & Gose, 2022). There were far fewer billionaires in 1992, for one thing. And the percentage of wealth held by today's ultrarich is greater than it was in 1992.

In fact, *The New York Times* recently pointed out that the No. 1 billionaire on the first Forbes 400 list, put out in 1982, would be ranked No. 182 (tied with several others) on the current list, adjusting his wealth to today's dollars (Stanley, 2022). Megadonors are clearly more mega now than in 1992 — and this looks like it will continue, as Bill Gates recently announced plans to give another $20 billion from his own fortune, and to increase the foundation's giving to $9 billion per year by 2026 (Di Mento, 2022).

Donor-advised funds grew exponentially.

Maybe the most widely observed and discussed difference in the giving landscape now compared to 1992 is the number of "donor-advised funds" (DAFs). DAFs of course existed in 1992, mostly as endowed funds at community foundations. But in the years since, not only has the number of DAFs and the contributions being made through them skyrocketed, but the institutions serving as sponsors for these DAFs have diversified.

The National Philanthropic Trust (2021) estimates that in 2020, the total number of DAFs exceeded 1 million for the first time (1,005,099), and those DAFs contributed $34.6 billion to charities. Just ten years earlier, in 2010, those estimates were only 184,364 DAFs contributing $7.24 billion. While we don't have comparable 1992 data, the DAF numbers were surely much smaller then.

While community foundations as DAF sponsors have been a part of this growth — for example, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, flush with DAFs created from tech fortunes, is now one of the largest foundations of any kind in the country — much of the soaring increase in DAFs has occurred through other types of sponsors.

Most prominent among these are national public charities created by financial institutions to provide easy-to-use, relatively low-fee accounts for donors. It is not an overstatement to say that Fidelity Charitable (launched in 1991), Vanguard Charitable (1997), and Schwab Charitable (1999), among others, fundamentally changed the giving landscape. In fact, if you measure 501(c)(3) public charities by annual contributions (money coming in), Fidelity Charitable is now the largest public charity in the country, surpassing the perennial No. 1 United Way in 2015 (Lindsay et al., 2016).

Budgets swelled and certain nonprofit types flourished.

While the number of charities grew steadily, their financial footprint ballooned.

Coming into 1992, scholars had already been tracking the expanding number of nonprofits in the U.S. Research especially focused on the national organizations created during the "advocacy explosion" of the 1970s (Berry & Wilcox, 2018), which some believed had come to overshadow traditional, usually smaller associations at the local level (Putnam, 1995). The landscape of 501(c)(3) public charities — like private foundations — had also become notably top-heavy, with the largest charities commanding a disproportionate share of resources.

This growth in numbers certainly continued apace after 1992. Table 2 shows the total number of public charities and private foundations in 1995 and 2020, according to the most reliable IRS data. In other words, there were nearly two-and-a-half times more nonprofits in 2020 than there were 25 years prior. (Note that these figures only track 501(c)(3)s, not other categories of tax-exempt 501(c)s.)

Table 2. Increase in Number of 501(c)(3) Organizations from 1995 to 2020

	1995	2020	% Change
Total public charities	514,511	1,289,655	151%
Total private foundations	56,580	95,142	68%
All 501(c)(3)s	571,091	1,384,797	143%

SOURCE: IRS Business Master Files; calculations by the Johnson Center

But more dramatic is the growth in the fiscal resources of that expanding group of organizations. We have already discussed the incredible increase in the financial footprint of private foundations, which far outpaced GDP growth. But public charities also saw tremendous expansion in their resources in the last three decades. Table 3 shows the increase in total assets and income of all public charities from 1995–2020 and the increase among just the top 100 largest public charities.

Table 3. Increase in Income and Assets of 501(c)(3) Public Charities from 1995 to 2020

	1995	2020	% Change
Income of all public charities	$707.19	$3,209.32	354%
Income of top 100 public charities	$194.64	$1,023.30	426%
Assets of all public charities	$751.65	$4,345.92	478%
Assets of top 100 public charities	$137.48	$961.59	599%

NOTE: All dollar figures in billions of nominal dollars.
SOURCE: IRS Business Master Files; calculations by the Johnson Center

When we consider that U.S. GDP grew around 180% (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022) from 1995 to 2020, we can see just how significant this financial expansion among public charities was — more than double the growth rate of the overall economy, and much more than that for nonprofit assets. This means that not only are there a lot more nonprofits than there were 30 years ago, but these nonprofits, on the whole, have much bigger balance sheets.

The finances of the 100 largest charities grew even more dramatically, furthering the trend toward greater and greater concentration of income and assets among the biggest nonprofits. It is staggering to think that a mere 100 of the nearly 1.3 million public charities in the U.S. today earn 30% of income in the sector and hold 22.1% of total assets.

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Philanthropy-serving organizations proliferated.

One area of significant growth among nonprofits that is particularly important for those in our sector has been the number of what used to be called infrastructure organizations — or what are now more commonly called philanthropy-serving organizations (PSOs). While many such organizations, like Independent Sector or the Council on Foundations, were well-established and influential actors in 1992, these support and membership groups have proliferated since then.

We now have dozens and dozens of regional associations of grantmakers, national affinity groups, capacity-building organizations, and other support organizations and membership associations — even associations of those associations. The United Philanthropy Forum, a network of regional and national PSOs, now has over 90 members. This explosion in such organizations also means there are more conferences, published resources, peer networks, etc., in our field now compared to 30 years ago.

Major initiatives to create community foundations had ripple effects.

The first community foundation was created in Cleveland in 1914. Nearly 80 years later, community foundations got a major boost in the early 1990s, especially in Michigan and Indiana. Starting in 1988, the Council of Michigan Foundations began working on a pilot program with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to provide challenge grants to seed community foundations in more communities around the state. One requirement of this funding was the establishment of a youth advisory council (YAC) in any community foundation created with the seed funding.

In 1991, after the success of the pilot, the Michigan Community Foundation Youth Program was created and led to a huge increase in the number and vitality of community foundations — with YACs — across the state. At the same time, in 1990, in Indiana, the Lilly Endowment established the Giving Indiana Funds for Tomorrow (GIFT) initiative, which led in subsequent years to the establishment of community foundations in all 92 counties in the state.

These and other national organizing efforts among community foundations have greatly increased their total number and have had other ripple effects in communities across the country (but especially in the Midwest). Many young people involved in YACs, for instance, have gone on to become philanthropic professionals themselves (Mangrulkar & Behrens, 2013). And community foundations are often key collaborators with other local funders in joint efforts such as collective impact initiatives.

In recent years, the orientation of many community foundations has also shifted, from acting more as philanthropic banks aimed primarily at serving donors, to embracing their role as community leaders and voices. The community foundation model has also become increasingly popular around the world.

Shifts in the sector reflected national events and cultural change.

The Aramony scandal was the first of many, with consequences for trust.

By 1992, William Aramony had been head of the national United Way of America for 22 years and had steadily expanded the organization's size and impact. But in February of that year, he resigned in disgrace amid numerous reports of sexual harassment, questionable relationships with young women funded through spinoff entities, and a lavish lifestyle of first-class flights, chauffeurs, posh gifts and vacations, and more, all expensed in suspect ways.

Aramony was eventually prosecuted, convicted, and put in prison for six years. But the scandal in 1992 was a signal moment for the sector, as it drew sharper attention from the media and the general public — many of whom were United Way donors in their own communities — to the internal workings of charities.

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Nonprofits in 1992 still enjoyed, on the whole, a high level of trust, especially when compared to trust in other major institutions such as the federal government (Salamon, 1999). In the years since, however, that trust has declined, not in small part because of the increased post-Aramony scrutiny, and the apparent appetite of the public for reports of "do gooders" doing bad things — or at least things that do not feel quite right for a nonprofit. There have been constant stories — not just of outright fraud or malfeasance, but of nonprofit executive salaries that seem too high, unsavory associations with "tainted" donors, high rates of contributed dollars being spent on fundraising or "overhead," and the like.

Public outrage continued in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict.

In late April of 1992 in Los Angeles, a jury acquitted the four officers charged with beating Rodney King the previous year. Six days of civil unrest — referred to by some, controversially, as "race riots" — followed, and the whole country watched as parts of the city burned. There had been other notable examples of protests and public outcry in response to the treatment of people of color, but the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict struck a chord.

According to the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (Salomon et al., 2014), the response to what happened in LA included new attention to race relations and diversity by foundations at the national and local levels and intensified minority-led organizing among grantmakers and nonprofits.

Unfortunately, as we know, what happened in 1992 has been repeated in many cities since, including the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 and the widespread protests against racial injustice and police brutality that followed. Many donors and nonprofits in communities across the country have responded repeatedly as well, and there is much debate in the sector now about whether those promises are being fulfilled, whether the response is expansive enough, focused enough on systemic injustice, and other issues.

Diversity, inclusion, equity, and justice became prominent areas of focus, but we still struggle to achieve them.

Compared to when the LA unrest happened in 1992, the philanthropic world today — especially donors and grantmakers — is much more focused on issues related to racial equity, social justice, systemic inequalities in communities of color, representation of diverse voices, and similar social challenges. This is a much more common topic at conferences in the sector and in industry and research publications.

To be sure, there were plenty of organizations, and some prominent donors, focused deeply on these issues in 1992. But it has become much more widespread in the last three decades. Unfortunately, this does not mean we have widespread agreement on best practices or effective solutions to address these persistent social problems and inequities.

A few voices in the field even disagree that diversity, equity, and inclusion should be priorities for philanthropy, arguing that so-called "woke philanthropy" is merely a current fad (Westhoff, 2021). But it is clear to many that concern for these issues is neither fleeting nor misplaced, and that we need better research knowledge — and more inclusive dialogue — about the best philanthropic and nonprofit responses.

> [P]romotion of service learning and student volunteering was part of the original mission of the GVSU center that eventually became the Johnson Center.

A push for national and community service created enduring programs.

On the campaign trail in 1992, nominee Bill Clinton often promoted the idea of national service — something distinct from the mandatory military service that is proscribed in other countries. He talked about voluntary and community service, facilitated and coordinated by the federal government.

In 1993, President Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act, establishing AmeriCorps as well as a new independent government agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). CNCS now manages AmeriCorps and many other service programs.

At the same time, many universities around the country were ramping up their own student community service and service-learning programs. In fact, this promotion of service learning and student volunteering was part of the original mission of the GVSU center which eventually became the Johnson Center. Several national nonprofits with a national service mission were also created at this time, including Teach for America in 1992.

Though the fervor around service has waned a bit in the decades since, it has by no means disappeared, and most of the programs created in those years around 1992 have endured.

'Reinventing' government made it an even larger source of nonprofit revenues.

Another, even more prominent campaign proposal from the Clinton-Gore ticket in 1992 was their plan for "reinventing government" — borrowing that phrase from the title of a bestselling book of that year (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). One of the primary ideas in the book was that governments should be "steering not rowing" — meaning, in part, that they should move away from providing government-funded services through a centralized bureaucracy and try more entrepreneurial approaches like contracting those services out to nonprofits.

While this was certainly not the only factor (and federal funding has dropped for some nonprofits), this strategy helped contribute to the continued growth of government funding as a source of revenue for the nonprofit sector over the past three decades. Government now provides about one-third of total nonprofit revenue, and much more than that for certain kinds of nonprofits, such as human service agencies (National Council of Nonprofits, 2019). This is likely one of many causes for the overall increase in the financial scope of public charities described earlier.

Measuring outcomes became the norm, and evaluation became a widespread practice of a new and more strategic philanthropy.

The professional practice of evaluation is, of course, not something invented since the '90s, but it has certainly become much more widespread in the philanthropic world, with many more foundations requiring some sort of evaluation these days. Nonprofits are also now expected to track — and be accountable for — not just their outputs (e.g., the number of students served in an afterschool program) but also the eventual outcomes of their efforts (e.g., an increase in the graduation rate). And more donors, such as the often-passionate adherents to approaches like venture philanthropy (Moody, 2008) and effective altruism (Singer, 2015) that arose in recent years, are basing their decisions on what one critic labels "metrics madness" (Schambra, 2014).

This rising focus on measurement and evaluation was influenced greatly by the reinventing government push described above. The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 embedded the practice of using logic models for planning and evaluating the government programs that funded nonprofits. Many foundations and charities adopted this practice more broadly, often substituting the idea of a theory of change for the more formal logic model.

This shift was also part of a larger move toward rethinking giving and grantmaking in ways that rationalized decision processes so they would be driven by measures of effectiveness, and prioritized accountability for results and scaling proven models. This more "strategic philanthropy" approach has carried many labels in the past couple of decades, and there is a healthy debate about just how different it is, despite its proponents' claims that it is a new and better way forward for philanthropy (Brest, 2012; Breeze 2011).

The boundary between business and philanthropy became far more blurred than anyone in 1992 could have predicted.

Many of the topics and trends that draw a lot of attention in the sector today lie at the increasingly blurry intersection of business and philanthropy — e.g., impact investing, B Corps, charitable LLCs, and microfinance (Moody, 2019). It is surprising how little these topics were on the agenda or radar of the sector back in 1992.

There was some talk at that time about socially responsible investing, and the divestment movement in the 1980s used market power to help bring an end to apartheid in South Africa. But the many innovations now collected under the umbrella of impact investing were not being practiced or even predicted 30 years ago.

Few if any endowed foundations, for instance, were screening their endowment investment portfolios to ensure alignment with their philanthropic mission, something that is common today. In fact, the Gates Foundation was called out in a highly public way in 2007 — in a *Los Angeles Times* exposé (Piller et al., 2007) — for having a 'firewall' between its grantmaking side and investments side. The foundation initially defended this position, saying they wanted to earn as high a return as they could so they could grant as much money as they could. But soon after the public turmoil, they started to reassess, and now have an official investment policy that ties their investments to their mission priorities.

Corporate social responsibility has also boomed in recent years, making it almost required for a corporation to show how it is doing good, not just making profits — and altering the relationship between corporations and nonprofits in the process. Ben and Jerry's and Newman's Own were operating as clearly socially responsible businesses in 1992, but today many more companies wear their social and/or environmental mission on their sleeves, often partnering closely with specific nonprofits or causes. The official B Corp certification was created in 2007 for companies that seek to maximize public benefit rather than just profits, and the number of B Corps has skyrocketed since.

Research and teaching capacity grew… but not to the level of our ambitions.

More degrees and academic centers were created as a new field of study matured.

At the time the Johnson Center was created, the academic field of philanthropic studies or nonprofit management (or other similar labels) was still in the relatively early stages of becoming a field. The Filer Commission in the 1970s had helped solidify the concept of a nonprofit sector and spawned the first wave of research and data on that sector. A small but active group of scholars had been organizing nascent scholarly associations and journals at that time also, and those were growing throughout the '80s.

Independent Sector and a few national funders and other organizations had been intentionally working to establish the study and teaching of philanthropy and nonprofits as a field, in part because there was increasing demand for both more data and more trained nonprofit professionals as the sector grew and professionalized.

But again, the field was just getting ramped up. In 1992, by one estimate (from colleagues at Seton Hall University) there were 32 universities offering a graduate degree or concentration in nonprofit management (or related subjects), up from just 17 in 1990. This number rose to 76 in 1997, and 97 by 2000 (Mirabella & Wish, 2001). The latest estimates — which are almost surely undercounting the total — show 401 colleges and universities with courses in nonprofits and philanthropy subjects, and 274 with graduate degrees (Seton Hall, n.d.). Undergraduate courses and degrees have been steadily increasing as well, including a wave of experiential philanthropy courses in recent years.

In addition, while the definition of an "academic center" is by no means widely agreed upon, by any definition we can confidently say there are far more centers now than in 1992. Independent Sector counted 24 such centers in 1991 (Weber & Long, 2021). That same year a membership association of centers — the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) — was formed. NACC currently has 54 members, but there are likely others out there who are not formal members. In short, the field of philanthropy and nonprofit studies has clearly matured in the past 30 years, and we now have considerably more and better data and research, and courses and degrees, than we did then. However, the picture is not entirely rosy.

Some of the biggest centers closed.

Despite the growth in degrees, courses, and centers in our field, not all progress was upward and positive. In fact, several of the biggest centers that dominated the academic landscape back in 1992 have closed at some point in the intervening decades — or have been significantly reduced or restructured.

- What was considered by many to be the first major center, the **Program on Nonprofit Organizations** founded at Yale in 1978, went from a thriving and fully staffed entity in its first 20+ years to a program struggling to find an institutional home. It is now a small program operated by Yale's School of Management.
- The **Institute for Nonprofit Organization Management** at the University of San Francisco, which was established in 1983 and created the nation's first master's degree in nonprofits, closed in 2009.
- The **Mandel Center for Nonprofit Organizations** at Case Western, started in 1984 and publisher of a core journal in the field, closed in 2012.
- Boston College's **Center for Wealth and Philanthropy**, which had been producing seminal research on giving since 1970, closed in 2015 with the retirement of its two principal scholars.
- In January 2022, the **Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies**, a leading producer of research on voluntary organizations globally and the primary source for the United Nations' categorization of such entities worldwide since 1987, closed its doors.

The reasons for the decline or demise of these major centers are varied (e.g., the departure of a central leading figure, loss of major funding, or decline of internal institutional support). But they are a reminder of how difficult it is for even prominent centers to stay afloat, despite the clear need and demand for research and teaching in our field.

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Increased funding led to major progress but has yet to meet its fullest ambitions.

When the W.K. Kellogg Foundation made the initial grant to start what would become the Johnson Center at Grand Valley State University in 1992 (matched by the university's own investment in the project), it did so as part of a growing push to increase funding for research and teaching about philanthropy and nonprofits.

Other major foundations, such as the Lilly Endowment, C.S. Mott Foundation, and a then-anonymous funder known as "Atlantic Philanthropies" (later revealed to be the foundation of reclusive and frugal businessman Chuck Feeney), seeded many new programs at universities, as well as prolific research and data projects at Independent Sector, Foundation Center, and the Urban Institute (which created a National Center for Charitable Statistics in 1982).

Kellogg's Building Bridges initiative funneled millions to support nonprofit academic centers and programs from 1997–2002 (Weber & Long, 2021). In 1991, a group of these funders also started the Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, managed by the Aspen Institute, which supported research in the field for the next 20 years (including the dissertation of your humble narrator). These funders had grand ambitions for what this major push for funding research, data, and teaching would yield. (They even began to meet and refer to themselves informally as "The Infrastructure Funders.")

In their most wide-eyed moments, these colleagues hoped that in the future — 2022, say — we would have deep and broad data on all aspects of giving and the nonprofit sector, and that data would be widely available. They envisioned a field of study that was institutionalized into the core fabric of universities across the country, and academic degrees that were as respected, standardized, and popular as the M.B.A.

In many ways, these hopes have been fulfilled. Our base of scholarship about philanthropy, giving behavior, the nonprofit sector, and more is way beyond what it was in 1992. We've seen above how many more degrees and centers there are today.

Yet the fullest ambitions of those who looked to build the field in 1992 have not yet been achieved. Degree programs are still marginalized or precarious in many universities, and standardization is still evolving (NACC recently launched the first accreditation program). There are numerous aspects of giving behavior and nonprofit organization dynamics that have received scant research attention.

[O]ur data about the sector, while much more extensive now, is still not on par with our data about other sectors.

Moreover, our data about the sector, while much more extensive now, is still not on par with our data about other sectors. For example, for many years the wealth of nonprofit data collected by the Internal Revenue Service, including data from their required 990 tax forms, was largely inaccessible to both the public and researchers. A landmark report in 2013 (Noveck & Goroff), alongside advocacy from many of our field's research leaders, led to a series of legal and policy changes, including federal legislation in 2019 requiring the public release of the raw 990 data in a publicly available, no-cost, and machine-readable format.

Yet despite this, we still do not have basic information about the nonprofit sector such as total employment, payroll, share of revenue from government grants and contracts, or the number of nonprofit 'births' and 'deaths' — at least not on any regularly updated schedule nor widely accessible platform. Meanwhile, state and federal government reports with this sort of information about other economic sectors — e.g., agriculture, auto manufacturing, education — are available on monthly, quarterly, and annual schedules.

In contrast, the nonprofit sector relies on ad hoc reports from researchers, foundations, PSOs, and commercial providers — with much of the data moved behind a paywall as the providers of that data struggle to make their own business models work. Clearly, there is much more work to do.

Conclusion

It should be clear from this review that the nonprofit sector and the practice of philanthropy have become considerably larger and dramatically more complex in the past 30 years. It should also be clear that the study and teaching of those subjects have also grown and diversified.

But overall, the rate and magnitude of change in philanthropy have outpaced our study and teaching of it, despite the fervent efforts of places like the Johnson Center. And there are no signs that the pace of growth nor the extent of complexity will slow in the next 30 years — especially as sectors blur even more and new experiments continue. The practice of philanthropy will continue to throw out new twists and challenges for the study of philanthropy. We will continue to need well-trained and credentialed professionals to work in this ever-more-complicated field.

We have so much more work to do.

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